DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 285 SO 022 071

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TITLE Methods of Resolving Conflict--The Voice of Norwegian Youth.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies Washington, DC, November, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conflict Resolution; Educational Research; Foreign Countries; High Schools; *High School Students; Interpersonal Communication; Interviews; Problem Solving; Qualitative Research; *Student Attitudes; Student Behavior; Youth
IDENTIFIERS *Norway

ABSTRACT

This study examines the beliefs of Norwegian 16 year-olds about conflict resolution strategies. During 1990-91 over 40 high school students were interviewed in over 50 upper secondary schools throughout Norway. The interviews were conducted in English with groups of two or three students. The students interviewed had stronger English language skills and were generally among the brighter and more verbally adept students. Interviewees were asked about how they would choose to resolve conflicts in situations with other students at school, with students outside of school settings, with siblings, and about how adults choose to resolve conflicts. The study reported that Norwegian 16 year-olds view compromise as the most effective tool for conflict resolution. The youths also tend to disfavor the use of intermediaries in conflicts such as those between parents or teachers. Courts and lawyers are even less popular as intermediaries. A 9-item list of references is included. (DB)

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Methods of Resolving Conflict - The Voice of Norwegian Youth

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SO 022 071

Paper Presented to the College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies Washington, D.C. November, 1991

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Methods of Resolving Conflict - the Voice of Norwegian Youth

The conflict in the Gulf reminded the world, once again, of the need to seek peaceful solutions to problems before they lead to conflict. This point has become of greater concern to educators over the past decade, and that concern has led to calls for better, more focused teaching of conflict resolution in schools.

It is interesting that such calls lead to curriculum development and new programs, yet they ignore a key issue. What do students already know and believe about the resolution of conflict? Qualitative researchers have grown more aware of a need to examine the "life" of various school cultures. This often comes about by immersion of the researcher into the culture, usually a classroom for a school year in order to better understand the culture. The classroom observation can be, and usually is, augmented by interviews, videotaping, photos, and the gathering of material of the culture in order to better illustrate the life of that culture.

During the year that I spent in Norway I hoped to be able to better understand and describe such a classroom's culture. The nature of my position, however, precluded that, since I traveled various schools nationwide and never stayed in a school for more than three days. Despite the sameness of the curriculum, I would be remiss in providing an ethnographic description of life in English classes in Norway. I did, however, do qualitative research through observation and by interviewing students in more than twenty of the nearly sixty different schools that I visited.

I could not just randomly wander verbally with students because of limited time; I also was primarily interested in what they knew of conflict resolution. Thus, I revised a survey interview instrument that I had used in 1983 with American and Icelandic students. I focused on how conflict seems to be resolved generally and in specific examples.

There are issues that needed to be addressed in regard to selection of students and validity in "results."

First, I should share my background. While an undergraduate sociology major, I had done a number of small interview studies with a variety of subjects. As a doctoral student in education and anthropology, that interviewing continued as part of other studies, one of which culminated in my dissertation study (Nelson, 1976, 1979, 1980).

Since then I have taught courses in qualitative research for curriculum students and helped a number of my doctoral students conduct qualitative studies, most of which involved the interviewing of subjects. I have tried to establish, then, my experience and background and, thus, faith in my training and ethical standing, as Mishler asserts is necessary. (1990, 1991)

In conducting my interviews I followed some premises that Kvale has subscribed to in this process. I tried to conduct the interview as a conversation and allowed the subjects to tell their stories (as much as possible) in the interviews. Kvale has also raised issues that I addressed with different choices. He feels that one could be seen as unethical by conducting and reporting research without written transcripts of interviews. He notes, however, and I have found this to be so, that written transcripts fail to convey voice, tone, facial expression, and other body language. In addition, the presence of the recorder may be so intimidating that it could be seen as an ethical factor itself.

My interviews were not recorded or transcribed. One reason for this was logistical - it was difficult to travel with all that I needed for my job, and the recorder was one more item. In addition, the setting for interviews did not always lend itself to recording. Students were often interviewed at short notice, in cramped quarters with interruptions and, sometimes, in places that had no electrical outlets such as halls or outdoors.

Thus my report presents narrative in a less precise manner. Even if my data were more precise there would still be no way to generalize regarding results. What qualitative research provides is better speculation than precision. The researcher

must present him or herself as "trustworthy" to the subjects and to purveyors of that research.

My interviews with 16 year-olds are limited in many ways. First in participant selection -- since I was in videregående skoler, these 16 year-olds were better off, educationally, than nonstudents of the same age; and because the students volunteered, they were likely to be better speakers of English. This provides another limitation, expression in a second language; but because students had had six years of English in school and were exposed to it daily on television, this was less of a concern.

I chose "first-graders" in the three upper secondary school, because in that first year the students have not been put into various curricular emphases such as languages, science, or business. This is mostly self selected by students, but it does alter the character of the classes and the individual concerns in those classes. Unlike in the U.S., first graders are in the same classroom with the same youngsters almost every period of the class week. Because of this, students know a small group of students very well and probably gain more comfort in their classroom dealings.

The interviews were explained to students as seeking "no right answers," just their ideas and beliefs. It seemed that students accepted this and responded honestly. Of course, under different circumstances -- time of day, year, international unrest, how they viewed the U.S. and/or me -- all could affect student responses.

At times, despite my intended focus, the interviews meandered into another direction. Often this was quite interesting, but simply off the task.

Another limitation was time. No more than one 45-minute period and often less (a 30-minute lunch hour, for example).

Despite all this, I felt that I received useful responses providing an often neglected perspective on the resolution of conflicts in society; in this case, Norwegian

society, one very similar to American society in a number of ways, but one distinctly different and Nordic.

This study examines the beliefs of Norwegian 16 year-olds in regard to conflict resolution strategies. In recent years more and more programs (programs have been sponsored on this by the ABA's Youth Education for Citizenship committee, Educators for Social Responsibility, The Community Board Program, Inc. and various school districts) have been proposed regarding teaching youngsters about resolving conflict. Few studies, however, have examined what young people already know and believe about how conflicts can and should be resolved. In 1983 the researcher questioned American and Icelandic 12 year-olds in this regard. The number questioned -- 12 -- was too little to be a full study, but this preliminary work helped to stimulate more usable questions for older students.

During 1990-91 the researcher traveled extensively throughout Norway and visited over 50 upper secondary schools. In the course of those visits, the researcher was able to interview over 40 high school students regarding appropriate cultural and personal conduct in conflict situations.

Despite Norway's general non-aggressiveness, there are recent studies of "mobbing" (e.g. Olweus, 1984, 1988), particularly among males of elementary and junior high age. This mobbing is still in evidence in Norway, but is almost never seen among high school youth.

The current study was conducted from October 1990 to May 1991 in 15 Norwegian schools. The sites were all over the country from as far north as Kirkenes on the Soviet border to as far south as Kristiansand on the North Sea. Each youngster was part of a group interview of 2-3 students. This was done to ensure that all concepts would be clearly understood. Since all interviews were conducted in English, it was helpful to have another student present in case students were to have trouble putting some ideas into English. Of course, the risk of "contamination" of responses was increased, but this was seen as less likely, especially since the

researcher conducted all interviews. Each interview session was 20 to 30 minutes in length. Students responded to a series of open-ended questions regarding predicting their own behavior in given situations. The situations involved in-school and out-of-school instances for youngsters and in- and out-of-home situations for adults. Youngsters both suggested predicted and "appropriate" behavioral responses and then discussed why those responses were given.

Youngsters volunteered for participation and were selected by their teachers in the rare case that there were too many volunteers. All of the participants were first-year students in the high schools and were in the "language major" with particular emphasis in English. All thus had a minimum of six years of English study and could understand all researcher questions with only minimal difficulty.

By the time that they reach 16, Norwegians are dramatically non-confrontational. They are not as unemotional as Icelanders, but are generally less volatile than other European groups or Americans. All this is indicated by their responses in the interviews. When faced with a conflict, Norwegians seek compromise or simply concede. This is not to show weakness, but politeness.

In potential conflicts with other youngsters, Norwegians will be deliberate in trying to find the source of disagreement rather than reactive in responding to potential provocation. Youngsters also see little use for mediators except in extreme cases and would almost never use authority figures to resolve a potential dispute.

The conduct of adults is viewed in a consonant manner. Confrontation is to be avoided. If necessary, it is done in a direct but polite manner, and changes are expected (and usually do occur).

It should be noted that outside influences (increased travel, foreign media programs, et al.) have increased the potential for the use of courts over the past ten years, and many of the youngsters seem aware of slowly shifting beliefs about the use of such institutions in resolving conflict.

Preliminary results. Overall, Norwegian 16 year-olds in vg. skoler are remarkably consistent in their responses, be they in rural or urban areas, inland or on the coast. Student behavior seems consistent, generally, with student beliefs, but it cannot be emphasized enough that the students involved were some of the better language students, where better academic students are generally found, in the vg. skoler, which is chosen by the better academically and more verbally skilled students.

In regard to student dispute settlement there is agreement that arguing, insisting on preference based on age or temporal primacy are not even considered, let alone utilized. If there is a conflict over use of an item, students generally suggest one of four response paths.

One is to explain one's needs, and the assumption seems to be that the other student would do so also. That student whose need is greatest, e.g. he or she has something due sooner, would then use the object in question. If there is similar "urgency," students suggest that the other person could use it, and then it would be used by the first student. This may seem idealistic to some (it did to me), but the unprodded consistency of such responses led me to feel that these assertions of actions were believed and would be followed as described.

A third course of action which was popular was for a copy of the material to be made, and then book sharing wouldn't be necessary. This is truly a modern solution and somewhat begs the question of a culturally appropriate response.

In the rare instance that some agreement could not be reached, students would either call another library (if there were one) or just leave and return later to use the volume in question.

The emphasis in these instances was on logic, forthrightness, honesty, and emotional control. Some students indicated that failure to reach a logical agreement might make them angry inside, but that would be the limit of their anger.

Being insulted or subjected to some rude comment would elicit more feelings of anger and hurt, but lack of overt response was universally agreed upon. Students

suggested three general response paths. One was to ignore the comment and simply keep walking despite being angry and/or pained. This was seen as proper Norwegian behavior.

A second response was to respond with a retort similar to an American, "says you" or "up yours," etc. This was less common, but mentioned by a number of students. The intent was not to be confrontational, nor to carry the issue further. In actuality, there was a verbal equilibrium that was being sought, consciously or subconsciously. When that was reached, closure was achieved. Since Norwegians do not seem to relish being challenged, the issue would most likely have ended with this retort.

The third path of response was to calmly ask the "insulter" for clarification. If the slur were true, the student might ignore it. But if it were untrue, a number of students said that they would seek to correct the untruth. They might seek the source of the slur or ask for a fuller explanation.

This kind of behavior might surprise Americans who seem to insult people readily. To many Norwegians the idea of an insult, as such, was impossible, and they would take the comment literally. In that capacity truthful explication would be sought.

The person doing the insulting might have some effect on the student's response. For example, some students said that if they knew the person, they would probably come back at him or her with a retort. If they did not, they might ask for a fuller explanation. A few students had an opposite view; that is, they would provide a retort if they did <u>not</u> know the insulter and ask for clarity if they knew the person.

In seeking explication, some students espoused such earnestness that they claimed that they would ask the insulter how they could correct their problem; that is, improve their behavior. These students observed that a direct insult was far better than talking behind one's back.

The use of intermediaries in authoritative school positions was generally eschewed. No students would use the rektor (school principal) as a source of conflict

resolution. A few said that they neither knew who the rektor was nor what the rektor even looked like. Only in one interview set did three students say that each might use the principal if there were a problem with a teacher and a grade or if they felt that they were not being taken seriously by a teacher.

As for using a teacher to help with a conflict situation, most students immediately said that they would never use one. Some modified that upon my probing to "maybe for something very important," but no one could come up with such a possible instance. It is possible that this was an example of informants trying to provide answers that they thought that I wanted, but this is purely speculative. A few students noted that teacher-student relations were not like the U.S. "Teachers expect pupils to act mature here," a female student in Oslo told me.

Two students noted that they might turn to a teacher if a problem with a student were chronic and seemingly unresolvable, but more common was the notion of seeking help from the parents of a friend. These people, at least five students observed, could be talked to more easily and openly than teachers or even one's own parents. This surrogate parent role is more common in less developed societies, but in Norway it may have grown recently because of inability to face uncomfortable issues with parents. The respondents who mentioned use of friends' parents were in two isolated communities, so that may account for the confidence in family "outsiders." These communities were Kirkenes and Svolvœr.

Some students did say that if things were a problem, they would go to their parents for assistance and talk with a teacher if parents felt that it was a good idea. One girl explained that "telling" is highly unacceptable and another noted

> It's not like in the states. We aren't really close to our teachers. That's the way they like it. I'd talk to my parents first. If they suggested that I talk to the teacher, I'd do so.

Adult problems. The students were questioned about how adults can and do resolve conflict situations, and they generally saw adults as avoiding conflict and compromising instead. Regarding specific situations, most students saw Norwegian

adults as choosing to avoid "competition" for the last seat on a bus or a public conveyance. Most students felt adults would offer the seat to the other and, in response to that, both might stand. They also might "feint" a bit, then one would sit. Many students thought that the one riding the farthest would or should sit; but when asked about determining that, few felt that a discussion to discover that would actually ensue. The students' explanation was logical, but the awkward crush of the environment would most likely make such a scenario unlikely, more of a fantasy solution. Stamping tickets and people boarding every minute would make a protracted resolution nearly impossible.

Almost all students noted that gender, age and amount of packages would be factors in seating. Older people or people with encumbrances would or should be yielded to. Women may receive preferential treatment. (A personal note: On the Oslo T-ban, this is generally true. One notable exception has been young soldiers on Friday or Sunday afternoons. Unless prodded, they sit, seeming not to notice elderly standing passengers.)

A more complex problem was that of a neighbor's loose dog relieving itself in another person's yard. The "proper" adult response varied according to the students. This situation reminded some of similar situations in their neighborhoods, so it was not entirely an abstract or unreal situation.

One common response was to ignore the situation and hope that it would resolve itself. After waiting some time and having the situation continue, students felt adults would/should talk to the neighbors about the problem. That's as far as many students went. This was seen as enough. But if it was not sufficient, a number of students had no other ideas as to a response. This is significant for what is says of Norwegian culture. First, facing a problem directly will/should solve it. Confronting someone should only occur after a reasonable time, during which a problem can be corrected without confrontation. The time for this is "fuzzy," but is much longer for

Norwegians that it would be for most Americans. Even when confronting someone, students emphasized that one should not show anger and should stay under control.

A few resolutions paths were suggested if direct confrontation were unsuccessful. First is use of a third party. A couple students mentioned using the neighborhood leader or other neighbors. Two students emphasized that the police should not be used, though four said that the police might be used, but this was very unlikely unless one were very angry. More likely was the threat of calling the police. One student personalized the problem by explaining that she has severe allergies. She said that her doctor should call the neighbor to buttress her request for dog control. Two suggested asking the kommune for help (in some unspecified manner).

Only two responses suggested use of a lawyer or a court, an interesting contrast with likely American scenarios. The most surprising suggestion (to me) was offered by students in three different areas in the country -- build a fence! One noted that if there was already one there, then it should be repaired and the "offended" adult would just pay for it. One offered to build a fence at his own expense, but this was exceptional.

One student's suggestion was that if there were no positive response from the neighbor when repeatedly asked to control their dog, then the dog's feces should be thrown back into the neighbor's yard. This was the most extreme suggestion, and it came from a young woman on Svolvaœr. It was surprising, but no more so than the one-third or more of those questioned who kept faith that continual requests for relief would eventually succeed.

Students outside of school. Most students said that disputes with friends (if any arose) were the most easily solved of any dispute situation. Most had a scenario of argumentation, separation for cooling off and forgetting the argument. Half the students provided some variant on this theme. Some (a few) asked parents or other adults for advice in a dispute with their peers.

The level of friend dispute may reach yelling at each other or slamming doors when separating in anger. Physical remedies were not considered, and almost all disputes were settled by the next day.

Five or six students thought that girls' arguments were more contentious with girls shouting. They also saw girls as more serious and, thus, arguing about more substantive issues. Boys, they felt, were less serious and laughed about most issues, a function of avoidance behavior.

Siblings. Students were asked how sibling disputes were settled. Most students minimized differences, particularly with close in age, same gender siblings. Younger sibs, particularly boys to older girls, seem to be able to provoke more shouting and the occasional use of parents as mediators.

Shouting was not uncommon in sibling disputes; and though less common, some admitted fighting physically with a sibling. Disputes and not talking for a few days were also occasional results. This contrasts sharply with behavior with friends.

Some students appeal to parents. Some never do. Some admitted parents sometimes interceded uninvited. These kinds of disputes seem to have the least general agreement on "acceptable" Norwegian behavior.

Discussion. Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to make accurate generalizations based on such a small, self-selected sample, some observations can be offered with commensurate questions. By the age of 16 Norwegian videregående youngsters recognize that frankness is useful, but that challenging, confrontational behavior is largely frowned upon in Norwegian culture. Compromise is seen as most effective, and larger issues of need should be considered in conjunction with personal concerns.

Intermediaries can be used in disputes, but as secondary or "last" resorts. If intermediaries are used, the closer to the participants that they are, the more likely that they will be appealed to. Even adults should choose this path with the threat of police being as far as disputants might go in using these agencies. Courts and lawyers may

or may not be trusted. They are seen as ancillary to dispute settlement rather than an integral part of such a process. All of the situations pertained to civil acts rather than criminal acts, it should be remembered.

Another part of maintaining order in conflict is a lack of emotion and an appeal to rational explanations. Over and over these were emphasized and students were perplexed if I asked, "What if they don't work?". Norwegians respond to sound, unemotional explanations. They are taught by their culture to help those in need. Students often "solved" problems on that basis.

What happens when Norwegians deal with outsiders or the culture absorbs immigrants? Is Norwegian behavior easily learned? Is it clearly "taught" to immigrants? Are there physical difficulties that come with feeling pain, anger, dismay, and repressing them? If not, can or should this behavior be taught beyond Norway? Can such cultural behavior continue to exist (and should it) in the face of the vast cultural assault of non-Norwegian (or non-Nordic) television and cinema? I have no clear answers for these questions, but they must be considered in light of what cultural contact has meant to the psychological well being of various cultures worldwide.

Suggestions for further study. Further augmentation of this work can come by expanding it upwards to adults or downwards to undomskole students and through observations of actual in- and out-of-school behavior of such populations. Even interviewing other youngsters of 16 might yield contrasting data, though I would hope that my subjects would supply similar answers. I cannot say that their behavior would commensurately follow, however.

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